

VEIL - A STATE OF MIND: IMTIAZ DHARKER'S *PURDAH-I* AND *PURDAH-II*

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ABSTRACT:

Purdah, an instrument of masculine effort for restricting and limiting the role of women in society is a violation of the basic rights, freedom and dignity of women. Imtiaz Dharker considers Purdah not only a concealing garment but a state of mind which works as suppression and deadlock to the intellectual awakening and growth of women. Although Dharker's poetry is a confluence of three cultures, but her roots being in Muslim culture her collection of poems *Purdah I* and *Purdah II* comes out as a revolt against Purdah which has socio-cultural and social religious associations mainly for Muslim women and also for some Hindu women in the Northern part of India. Dharker considers Purdah system making women feel alienated from their true self. Her poems enable us realise the tragic story behind and beyond the veils.

KEYWORDS: Purdah, State of mind, Shame, Sin, Woman as object, Coffin, Coils of conventional Patriarchy, Consciously writing

INTRODUCTION:

I would like to begin this paper by quoting my self-composed poem on 'Veil' which is compiled in a Coffee Table Book (Pictorial Poetry).

What needs to be veiled ?

My flesh or your lust.....?
My face or your gaze.....?

Your lust peeps through thick or thin.
Your gaze penetrates my skin.

Your insatiable hunger to control,
Why I need to be a scroll.....?

Every time you forge some way
To keep my being at bay.

Whether it is at home or field

You use me as a shield.

You think I am born to take care of you;
You categorize my role and censor what I do.

You never let me be as I want;
My dream you endeavour to thwart.

Forever in your rob will I myself veil,
If you with true heart will ever hail.

Forever by your side will I tread,
If you love me beyond your need.

I composed this poem after reading Imtiaz Dharker's poems in her collection of poems *Purdah I* and *Purdah II*. The pain and poignancy endured in suffocation and suppression by the subjugated women under patriarchy have found a justifiable outlet in the creative instinct of Imtiaz Dharker. Her poetry is a confluence of three cultures as she regards herself a Scottish Calvinist Muslim. Her undaunted spirit, the intensity and eloquence of her life and her poetic accomplishment have left her female counterparts in soaring spirits not only inside the Islamic social, cultural and religious set-up but also outside it.

Reflecting feminist perspective her poetry depicts deeply sensitive and keenly insightful understanding and poignant reactions to the wrongs and songs of the daily life of women under the norms, rules and sanctions laid down by the patriarchal society for them. Although her poetry is a confluence of three cultures, but her roots being in Muslim culture her first collection of poems *Purdah* (a volume of twenty five poems in five sections) comes out as a revolt against purdah which has greater socio-cultural and social religious association for Muslim woman. Purdah, a symbol of repression on women devastatingly ruinous to woman's personality is a violation of the basic rights, freedom and dignity of women. Imtiaz Dharker regards purdah not just as a concealing garment but as slate of mind which works as suppression and deadlock to the intellectual awakening and growth of women. In words of A.K Tiwari, "The purdah is an instrument of masculine effort to keep low the spirit of indendence in women.....The conformance to the norms of purdah restricts and limits the role of women, keeping them within the confines of the Jenana apartments and keeps their status low."

Purdah, nothing more than woman's prison house, makes her a puppet in the hands of social power mongers, makes her devoid of choices and works as a terrible weapon for her seclusion from society. Imtiaz Dharker, with her social cultural growth and lived experiences, has exhibited her subtle artistry in exposing the Purdah system in her title poems and poems contained in her early collections *Purdah I* and *Purdah II*.

Muslim families start training their girl children of five to nine years to wear purdah with the conviction that it protects her from the penetrating gaze of public eyes. At an age group of twelve to fifteen, they are forced into a rigorous kind of seclusion from men folk. At the same time a girl is made conscious of her sexual growth as perhaps others are more conscious about it. All other types of consciousness which is necessary for her overall personality development is ignored downrightly. This idea is expressed in the beginning lines of “Purdah” by Imtiaz Dharker:

One day they said
She was old enough to learn some shame

The conservative society is cautious and conscious enough to think it its duty to teach an adolescent girl some manner, decorum and dignity. As Dharker says in the same poem from *Purda I*:

carefully carrying what we do not own
between the thighs, a sense of sin

A woman has been taught to be ashamed of her body (which is a gift of Nature itself) and to accept it as sin. As Pandey puts it “The body-culture and its degrading fleshy enterprise, inflicts a guilty conscious.” This biological growth is associated only with sexuality which is a part of man’s mental state. People around are the same but their looks are changed with a purpose. Imtiaz Dharker makes the idea clear in the self same poem in the following lines:

People she has known
Stand up, sit down as they have always done.
But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly.

Not only they themselves make different angles, but also make the young girls wear burkah and thus build a cocoon around herself. Imtiaz Dharker calls this seclusion as a kind of “the interior colonization” which reduces the woman to a walking corpse. A Purdahnaseen is decimated to a clod of earth, a dying tree whose roots desperately struggle to balance and withstand. This miserable plight of women has aptly been highlighted in the lines:

She stands outside herself,
Sometimes in all four corners of a room.
Wherever, she goes, she is always
inching past herself,

as if she were a clod of earth.
 and the roots as well,
 Scratching for a hold
 Between the first and second rib.

The discrimination against women and their alienation from many human activities around them is highlighted in the poem, “The Prayer”. Standing outside the mosque the female protagonist wishes to appeal to the almighty for mental comfort, but to her utter horror finds that religion offers no solace as she is not allowed to enter the mosque. She wishfully looks at the worshippers thronged inside hopefully praying and feels as if God has also yielded to man’s dictate and man’s writ runs large in the house of God who himself is a male in a phallogocentric world. The protagonist puts ahead questions out of sheer curiosity:

“what prayers are they whispering?”
 And “what are they whispering?”

The questions contain a subtle touch of irony. In another long poem, “purdah II”, Imtiaz Dharker presents the tenets of religion unresponsive to woman’s suffering. She discovers all basic tenets of religion favouring man and suppressing woman. This kind of alienation makes her realize as if the prayer-call “allah-U-akbar” is only a piercing note; the pages of Koran are like old bones; the words of the Moulvi sound unsympathetic, the prayers are nothing more than a rhythm on the tongue to which the body mechanically sways and all these provide hopefulness to the men but offers no solace to the agonized women. Her mind visualizes the myriad women before her who prayed and still suffered miserably. Imtiaz considers this kind of religion as a farce created by a patriarchal system under the weight of which woman is cracking.

This poem, “Purdah II” tells the woeful tales of many women who try to break the shackles with the hope and dream of a free new world. The poem is an undaunted criticism of the way the society works against the freedom, dignity, will and choice of woman. The woman finds least comfort being bought and sold in the name of marriage. What is more, these atrocities are committed against her by her own parents- the very hands that nurtured, nourished and brought her up. They are treated like animals as Imtiaz says:

They have all been sold and bought,
 The girls I knew.

The virgins are taught to bind and are fated to live and die with no choice of their own:

Unwilling virgins who had been taught
especially in this strangers land to bind
their brightness tightly round,
whatever they might wear,
in the purdah of the mind.

They are taught to feel a sense of pride in having the name of man and surrender gladly to their passionate delights:

Night after virtuous night
You performed for them.
They warmed your bed.

The speaker in the poem endeavours to waken the humanity to the degrading and dehumanizing effect of social, cultural and religious norms on women by citing the examples of individual characters Saleema and Naseem. Saleema married, divorced, remarried, produced children annually to each husband; when she could bear this all no more, she sought refuge in her mother's lap:

At last a sign, behind the veil
of life;
found another man, became another wife,
and sank, sank into the mould of her mother's flesh
and mind, begging approval from the rest.

Unlike Saleema, Naseem eloped with an Englishman, hoping a release from the man-made bondage of her culture, society and religion. She manages to get out of her purdah, but in or out, her condition remains the same. She is faced with the stark reality and learns that "a man is a man", no matter where he is and to whatever community he belongs to. Her condition is described in these lines:

There you are, I can see you all now
in the tenements up north.
In or out of purdah. Tied or bound.

Shaking your box to hear
how freedom rattles---
one coin, one sound

Thus by referring the Muslim tradition of *Purdah*, Imtiaz Dharker overtly hits hard on the wide spread male domination irrespective of boundaries of countries, religion or community. Where as section one of the volume *Purdah* focuses on the internal suffering of secluded woman who is tied and bound with the shackles of cultural, religious and social tenets, section two exposes the external suffering of woman fraught within the coils of the conventional society. She is presented as a social outcaste, symbolically one with a hunch on her back due to constant stooping. She is made to consider herself as an unclear and tarnished figure in the eyes of others and not allowed to raise her eyes or head. In the poem, “Pariah”, the victim utters:

When I must speak to them
 their words take and tie my tongue
 I rarely raise my head

Ezekiel rightly opines that the images in Dharker’s poems, “are not merely images created for poetic effect, they are like blazing fires compelling the readers to take notice.” (“Imtiaz Dharker” India poetry:online). Section three of *Purdah* intensifies the same tale of helplessness and lack luster life of women in a society where woman is raised to be sacrificed. In the poem, “The Child Sings”, the woman is presented as analogous to a helpless infant making unsuccessful attempts to sing but ends up only in babbles:

The child is thinking
 Nothing.
 Sometimes she sings
 notes that cannot find
 an aim.

* * * *

Years pass
 And yet it is the same.
 She comes back.

A door opens.
 Light spills out
 around her body
 draped in black.

She is nothing but a crack
 where the light forgot to shine.

Another poem, “A Woman’s Place”, describes the position of women and how she is treated as the “Other”. As Simone De Beauvoir states, “One is not born a woman: one becomes one.....” Women’s helplessness to accept male ascendancy politely and timidly is pointed out poignantly:

Mouths must be watched, especially
 if you're a woman. A smile
 should be stifled with the sari end.
 No one must see your serenity cracked,
 even with delight.

And the concluding lines define the women's place in man-made society:

.....how close we are,
 Fear, you tell me, is a woman's place.

Imitiaz Dharker shows concern with the exploration of the various intricacies and conflicts of the man-woman relationship as well as talks of the borderline between 'freedom' and 'struggle' in the section four and five of *Purdah* poems titled 'Borderlines: Battlefields I & II'. Here Imitiaz endeavours to offer solutions to the problems of women, she explains that prejudiced notions of human beings transform the world in battlefield envenoming their minds with raciest/ sexiest/ colour discriminations. In the poem, "Battle line", the demarcation lines are raised between man-woman, but they behave the same after the battle lines are drawn. As it is explained:

When the body becomes a territory
 Shifting across uneasy sheets
 When you retreat behind
 The borderline of skin

Turning, turning,
 barbed wire sinking in

 Forgetful of hostilities
 until, in the quiet dawn,
 the next attacks.

At the altar of these borderlines is the woman who is sacrificed and it is she who experiences the pain more than the man. Woman reaches a stage where the flesh dies on the bone, freezing her into stone bereft of love, desire or pain. The poem, "Stone", exhibits the agonized figure of woman:

It won't be long before
 you reach that place
 where flesh dies gently,

creeping round the bone,
where wisdom lodge in the cracks
that were your eyes:
without desire, lust, pain,
your face a great wild landscape
beaten into stone

The section concludes with a profound revelation that emancipation for a woman has to be only in the breaking of these barricades set by conventional tenets of patriarchy and redefining herself. At the same time Imtiaz highlights that this redefinition of woman's image cannot be achieved merely by a feminine effort. Collective endeavour of the male and the female is required to reset the image of woman. Both have to create a conducive atmosphere by transcending the religion - coloured mind and by eradicating the evils in the society that had been unleashed by the male-oriented social code. Arundhati Subramaniam interviewed Imtiaz Dharker, which was published in 'The Hindu'. Here she said, "Dharker's poetic journey is an interesting one to map. *Purdah* (1989), her first book, explored a somewhat interior politics through an exploration of the multiple resonances of the veil. The result was a work of rich texture and obliquity - of doors "opening inward and again inward", of the subtle interplay of advance and retreat across "the border line of skin".

Contrary to many would believe the tradition of *Purdah* is still going strong in conservative societies. Apart from Muslim societies, it is prevalent in many of the backward classes of northern India, as well as among the highly prestigious classes like Rajputs. The imposition of veil in the form of "Ghoonghat" on Hindu Women (specially on the women of North India) comes as a defense mechanism against the Muslim invaders but the society ended up adopting it and even forcing the women to wear a veil even when there are no invaders. The situation of Muslim women is becoming more problematic as on one hand it is the natural desire to be free from this imposed identity, on the other hand it is the question of one's cultural identity. In current politicized atmosphere it is hard to say how many Muslim women will openly admit that veil is a religious cultural and social imposition. That is why Imtiaz Dharker feels that *Purdah*, an ultimate symbol of paternalistic oppression of women, gets a life of its own. It is a state of mind, but she feels it equally applies to men and women. Its oppressiveness comes out of the concept of shame. Ranjit Hoskote in his Review published in "*The Times of India*" writes,

"In "*Purdah*" she memorializes the between-ness of a traveller between cultures, exploring the dilemmas of negotiations among countries, lovers, children....."

CONCLUSIO: However, today, *pardah* is viewed as a flagrant violation of the basic rights, freedom and dignity of women. *Purdah* is treated as symbol of repression on women as it is devastatingly ruinous to the personality of women. To be covered from head to foot in the black veil is more indispensable to Muslim women. There has been and is a sporadic revolt and heated controversy in the print and electronic media against this practice to regenerate and rejuvenate female psyche. That is why its evils are viewed as outweighing its good. Imtiaz Dharker, with her social and cultural growth and lived experiences spanning three countries- Pakistan, England and India- has shown her subtle artistry in exposing the *Purdah* System in her title poems, poems related to it, in all its complexes of theme and style. The symbolism inherent in *pardah* also finds its subtlety and simplicity in alien cultural setting.

Purdah-I and *Purdah-II* are marvelous modern poems where in Dharker shows the undaunted conviction and revolt against a highly sensitive and explosive issue pertaining to the emancipation of women from a society with deep-rooted conservatism. According to Rajeev Patke: “*Purdah-I*” offers deeply felt evocations of the experience of growing up as a woman in an Islamic society while as “*Purdah-II*” elaborates on how the symbolic veil divides and suppresses”. It is through women speakers in the poetry of Dharker that we are able to identify the pathetic situation of and problems of women in the society. Dharker shares the experiences of all women who suffer these in human conditions. Madhurita Chaudhury rightly states, “Dharker’s women enable us to examine large social problems pertaining to this religion, country and identity”.

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